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## Imported memories: the Italian audience and the reception of American movies about the Second World War

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**Imported Memories:**

**The Italian audience and the reception of American Movies about the Second World War.**

Introduction: American images of the Second World War in Italy.

American cultural influence on Europe has been the subject of numerous research projects that bring together media studies, cultural studies and political history<sup>1</sup> to focus on the key role played by American cinema in this pacific ‘invasion’<sup>2</sup> Hollywood movies have been identified as the main conveyors of American models of consumption, ethical and political values, social identities, and even fashion trends. However, less attention has been paid to the impact of American representations of the Second World War on European culture. This essay will investigate specifically on the reception of American movies on the Second World War in post-war Italy; the first part will briefly discuss the theoretic and methodological framework and current literature on the theme; the second part develops a closer analysis of one original source that is of relevance to the subject.

In the United States the memory of the last world conflict rapidly became a primary source of collective identity: the ‘good war’ or ‘the war that would end all the wars’ was frequently represented

as a conflict between good and evil, and a great victory for freedom and democracy (Pauwels 2002; Stoler 2001; Adams 1994; Pieheler 1995; Wynn 1996). Far from remaining limited to American public opinion, this image of the war, was exported all over the world along with other cultural products of the new superpower while cinema played a main role in this process. Even before Pearl Harbor, Hollywood had been producing films about the conflict in strict cooperation with official propaganda institutions, and this continued albeit in less ‘war-like tones –after 1945 (Doherty 1993, Bruti Liberati 2004, 2010; ‘La guerra...’ 1991)<sup>3</sup>. The ‘war movie’ genre itself is frequently considered to have been born with the films focused on World War II which set standard features and *topoi* that would recur in the majority of later motion pictures<sup>4</sup>.

Yet, the impact of American representations of Second World War, and of Hollywood movies in particular, on European public discourse about the conflict and on the European imaginary has not been considered in detail by historians.. There are many reasons for this, from the underestimation of the ‘war movie’ genre to a tendency to focus on the analysis of American influence on consumerism and other related issues. But the most important reason is probably the acceptance of the ‘memory’ that prevailed in Second World War historiography. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the role of memory in modelling contemporary societies has been a major subject of historical research. This research focused first on the ways in which the First World War was remembered<sup>5</sup>, but subsequently memories of Second World War and the Holocaust have received a great deal of attention. Historians have closely analyzed the various regimes of memory that characterized each European country, from the myth of the Resistance and the realities of civil war to the original undervaluation of the *Shoah* and the subsequent centrality that it acquired, the legacies of fascism and the traumatic experience of civilians<sup>6</sup>.

These studies usually share an implicit acceptance of a notion of ‘collective memory’<sup>7</sup>, a set of representations of the past produced by a country, a social class, a population but not as something that can be, and actually was, imported from the outside. In other words, memories of the European conflict are various, different and conflicting, but always a European matter or even a national one.

Nevertheless, the possibility of the importation of memories is implicit in the same concept of 'collective memory'. In fact, if collective memory is, according to a frequently cited definition by Susan Sontag, 'not a remembering but a stipulating' (Sontag 2003, quoted in Assmann 2010), then it is not necessarily based on individual memories. If it has more to do with the social processes of re-thinking and re-creating the past than with the simple, 'biological' act of remembering, then it is more the product of complex social interactions than the sum of individual memories<sup>8</sup>. But one of the main characteristics of human artefacts, no matter whether they are material or immaterial, is the separation between the creator and the consumer: if they are not 'embodied' in an individual brain, then memories can be communicated, taught, and even exported as cultural products. In a certain way, we can say that trade and communication take the place of neurons and synapses in forging and spreading collective memories.

Memories of this kind are never simple recollections of past events; they have a social function in the present, an impact on existing society. They select specific facts to be remembered, they determine the way these facts will be told and define the meaning they will assume through the choice of culturally oriented language. Taking inspiration from Austin's theory of performative speech (Austin 1962), Jay Winter proposed a notion which can be effectively used to describe this phenomenon: the 'performance of the past'. In such a perspective, any act of collective remembrance is 'both a mnemonic device and a way in which individual memories are relived, revived, and refashioned' (Winter 2010). As in Austin's theory, truth and falsity are not important in this context; what is relevant is that the act of collective remembrance always has an impact on the society that performs it.

In this perspective, the importance of American war movies in shaping and modifying European memories of Second World War is undeniable. They were seen by millions of people<sup>9</sup>, they used a visual language directly and easily accessible to everybody, and they were almost all oriented towards an ideological representation of the conflict as the fight between the good Allies and the 'Axis of evil'. Nevertheless, defining and assessing their influence is very hard to do, as it is hard in

general to measure the impact on the public of a movie or another cultural product designed for mass consumption. As Stuart Hall's famous 'encoding/decoding model' maintained, we cannot simply consider the audience as a passive receptor of the ideology conveyed by a movie (Hall 1980). On the contrary, we must assume that spectators actively decode the message of a film through the filter of their own cultural background, which can be similar or opposite to the cultural perspective of the author, or more frequently partially similar and partially opposite, and interpret it in order to confirm and reinforce their personal interpretations of reality.

In doing this, however, the historian has many more problems than the sociologist: sources that show the reaction of the audience to a cultural product, and especially to an ephemeral product like a movie, are rare<sup>10</sup>. In the Italian case, a sociological study carried out in the late 1950s by an Italian-American team is famously unique. The study investigated the cinematographic preferences and opinions of the inhabitants of two villages in Tuscany and Sardinia on several films. Although not focused on war movies, the inquiry is quite useful for studying them since it gives a ranking of the most appreciated film genres. While 42 % of younger people (between the ages of 18 and 22) declared a preference for war movies, only 23 % of adults between the ages of 23 and 32 and 20% of those older than 32 shared that opinion. The authors concluded that the only meaningful difference that can be detected between the first group and the others is that the first was composed of people who were between six and ten years old during the war and whose memories of the conflict were thus less clear and vivid. Direct memories seem to oppose, in this case, the acceptance of the narratives proposed by cinema (MacLean 1958).

#### A new source: the publications of the *Centro Culturale San Fedele*.

Another source, which provides the basis for essay, offers much more detailed and exhaustive information. It consists of the evaluation forms completed by the audience members of a cultural center in Milan appraising five war movies shown from 1961 to 1966: *Judgement in Nuremberg*, *The Great Escape*, *The Longest Day*, *The Train*, and *King Rat*. The San Fedele Cultural Centre ( Centro

Culturale San Fedele) is an important Catholic institution that was founded by the Jesuit Arcangelo Favaro in the late 1940s and still functions today. It is devoted to promoting ‘a fruitful exchange between faith and art, between faith and thought’ (*Attività del centro culturale...*, 1959) from figurative arts to music, from theatre to cinema. Since 1956 it has organized film projections based on the *cineforum* model in which the audience are first taught to ‘read’ and decipher a movie and then asked to complete personal evaluations. The results of these questionnaires were published in a magazine called ‘Film discussi insieme’, along with a description of the movies and a ‘moral evaluation’ of their contents from a religious point of view<sup>11</sup>. Although it cannot be considered a statistically valid source, this publication is an extremely precious tool for the historian, mainly because of its rarity since it is unlikely to find direct testimony of what a non-specialist audience thought of a movie before the age of social media <sup>12</sup>. The films screened at the Centre in more than fifty years included the five movies listed above, but . before embarking on an analysis of the ‘reviews’ they received from the audience it is important to underline the limits of this source and to take some methodological precautions.

First of all, the people attending the Centre were by no means a representative sample of the Italian population. They were Catholic, even though probably more open-minded than the official Church at that time; they were presumably northern-Italian and urban; and, above all, they belonged primarily to the middle and upper classes( among the 56 spectators of *The Great Escape*, there were 14 managers and directors, 16 white collar or similar professionals, but not a single blue collar worker)<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, the texts published in the magazine were influenced by the organizers and perhaps also slightly modified by the editors. Each movie was preceded by a preparatory meeting, where the Centre’s experts explained how to watch the film and to evaluate its artistic and moral qualities: as for the latter, the audience was instructed to consider, besides its adherence to Christian ethics, its ‘educational value [...] for 16 to 18 year old adolescents’ (Bruno 1962, p. 6)<sup>14</sup>; as for the former, the audience was instructed to consider ‘script, acting, photography, and direction’ (Bruno 1962, p. 8).

Moreover, the texts are written in standard Italian, without mistakes or dialect terms, which suggests, that despite the high level of education that such an audience probably had, the intervention of professional editors.

Lastly, it must be remembered that the sample was not selected for scientific purposes and thus cannot be interpreted as if it had been. Spectators were asked for an opinion on the movies and instructed to consider some aspects more than others, but they were not provided with a detailed questionnaire nor required to answer questions that our study would warrant.

Despite all these limits, the source is of unquestionable value: for the five movies dealing with Second World War there are 175 forms compiled directly by the audience (16 for *Judgement in Nuremberg*, 56 for *The Great Escape*, 35 for *The Longest Day*, 46 for *The Train*, and 22 for *King Rat*), some very short and shallow, others long, rich, and compelling<sup>15</sup>. For each form, the gender, age, and occupation of the spectator are also given, so that a rough sociological profile of the audience for each film can be sketched. Unfortunately, as the authors remain anonymous, we cannot know how many spectators saw all the movies rather than some of them, apart from the rare cases when references to previously staged films appear in a text, or when the occupation is quite detailed (e.g.: ‘architect’ or ‘journalist’) and matches with age data. For example, a woman who was a 28 year old assistant professor when watching *The Great Escape* in 1963, is probably the same 29 year old female assistant professor who watched *The Longest Day* in 1964. Yet, the data we have are more than enough to give a detailed description of the audience we are dealing with. It was quite an educated audience: among those who watched *The Great Escape* at least 15 held university degrees and 8 were undergraduate students; *The Train* was seen by at least 12 university graduates and 4 students; and *The Longest Day* by at least 9 graduates and 1 student. This means that respectively 41%, 34 % and 28% of the audience had a university education or was in the process of receiving one, which is far higher than the national average at the time<sup>16</sup>. As we have seen before, the spectator groups were almost completely made up of people from the upper and middle classes: professionals, industrial managers, and employees<sup>17</sup>. However, the large presence of housewives<sup>18</sup> suggests that the public

was mainly composed of couples or families (a working husband and a non-working wife, and sometimes a student son/daughter: the typical 'bourgeois' family of northern Italy in the sixties)<sup>19</sup>. If we look at the age structure, this hypothesis seems to be confirmed. The average age of the audience ranged from 37.64 for *The Great Escape* to 50.5 for *King Rat*. The most represented group were usually middle-aged people: 23 out of 56 spectators of *The Great Escape* were between 35 and 55 years old; 27 out of 46 for *The Train*; 19 out of 35 for *The Longest Day*; 11 out of 22 for *King Rat*; and 5 out of 16 for *Judgement in Nuremberg*, the lowest representation of the five. Some screenings were attended by quite a large number of younger people between 18 and 25 years old and most of these were undergraduate students, which is a confirmation of the social profile of the sample: in the 1960s the majority of Italian people of this age group worked; university students came primarily from the middle- and upper- classes.

Finally, it must be emphasized that while the audience was quite educated, almost none could be considered as 'intellectuals': there was one self-proclaimed 'historian', a couple of journalists, one 'professor' (in all likelihood a high school teacher), a writer, and two university assistant professors. Apart from the latter and a scientist there were no university staff or scholars, no artists or authors. This contrasts both with the social level of the audience and with the 'classic' image of *cineforum* as a meeting point of intellectuals of different kinds. At the same time, even though we cannot exclude a political allegiance of some spectators (but we can rule out a communist or generally Marxist affiliation), no one self-identified as a member of a party, a union, or a politically oriented organization.

The *Centro San Fedele*, in conclusion, seems to have been frequented by people from the middle and upper classes whose occupation had more to do with commerce and business than with cultural activities, with a balanced presence of men and women and a clear gender characterization (all the most prestigious and rewarding occupations were represented by men). This makes it an especially interesting group that constitutes a sample of social sectors that are usually hard to study, unlike intellectuals or politicians, for instance, whose voices are extensively reported by magazines



and newspapers. Yet this group was fully integrated in the mass media system that was the privileged field of diffusion for American cultural products.

The impact of Second World War movies on the Centre's audience: an in-depth analysis of the source.

A good starting point for an analysis of the texts produced by the Centre's audience is the 'moral evaluation' of the movies that was requested by the organizers. More than 40 texts out of 175 make such evaluations, and in many more they are implicitly adopted. As noted before, spectators were not only taught to judge the aesthetic value of a film, but also its ethical adequacy in terms of Catholic doctrine. This orientation of the spectator's opinion by a religious authority obviously represents an additional complication for the historian, but also an opportunity. By directing the audience to pay more attention to ethical issues and to make its moral categories explicit, the responses offer valuable perspectives on moral beliefs that are usually hard to access. The best example may be that of *The Train*. The movie describes the struggle of French railway workers and partisans to prevent the Nazis from transferring to Germany a convoy full of masterpieces of art, stolen from the *Musée du Jeu de Paume* in Paris. The morality of sacrificing human lives to save art works is questioned at the beginning of the film, when the partisan leaders appear skeptical about the mission that had been requested by the Director of the Museum and was approved by the French Resistance headquarters in London. Audience was asked to express a moral opinion on the issue, leading the spectators to question the value of human life and its 'expendability', and to draw on their own moral principles to solve the dilemma. Some declared the non-negotiability of human life ('A human being cannot become a means!'), which is not surprising given the way the alternative was posed ('life against art') and their Christian perspective. More surprising is that the majority of the audience appears to have been torn between two or more hierarchies of values. On the one hand, there is the centrality of individual human beings ('Not a single painting will ever compensate for the life of the last hostage'); on the other, a web of different 'sources of morality', variously combined.

On one hand, spiritual values (according to a 62 year old architect, if lives can be sacrificed to deprive the enemy of its own, they can all the more be sacrificed to save important spiritual values, such as art works) and , on the other, patriotism (‘As it is right to defend one’s life, the country’s land, one’s ideas; so it is right to protect the spiritual heritage of a race, of a nation’), and the exceptional circumstances of war (*‘À la guerre comme à la guerre’*)<sup>20</sup>. A complex computation of the importance of each value, of the specific circumstances described in the movie, and of the alternatives available to the characters was the path followed by the majority of the audience; a path that sometimes led to increased confusion, rather than to a solution<sup>21</sup>. Patriotism, in fact, is by far the most cited argument, the only one that appears to be a valid alternative to the Christian pre-eminence of human life: for many, the works of art represented the ‘honour and glory of France’; for others, any action against the Nazi invader was ‘a demonstration of strength’, no matter what its specific aim was. For almost everybody, defense of the homeland was the strongest justification for sacrificing human lives: a 43 year old woman, who expressed the view that life could not be sacrificed to art, wrote that ‘the issue would have been very different if the train had been carrying munitions.’<sup>22</sup>. Again, this is not surprising, the Homeland having been the main propagandistic tool until 1945; and again, what is interesting in the use of the term is the complete shift to a defensive perspective that was far from any nationalist and aggressive impulse: as if patriotism could be acceptable, after the fall of fascism, only in its ‘lighter’ version.

However, we should not see here only a conflict between different systems of values, even though this aspect is present. The confusion identified above was produced by the movie itself, which poses the problem but does not solve it. From the initial conversation between the Director of the Museum and the partisan leaders (when the former demands they save the paintings, while the latter hesitates because of the risks involved) to the final scene where the hero (Burt Lancaster) is shocked by the number of hostages killed by the Germans he is fighting, the legitimacy of the mission is constantly called into question. The partisan leader who never gives up the enterprise, not even after many deaths have occurred is depicted as a hero, with all the typical features: he is fearless, smarter

and stronger than common people. The latent contradiction between these two aspects of the film is hidden during the dramatic sequences that dominate the movie, but when the audience is asked to focus on the underlying moral message, the contradiction comes to light. Therefore, the presence of different systems of values in the spectators' judgment can also be interpreted as an attempt to solve this contradiction through the mobilization of all the ethical sources available. Obviously, this is only a hypothesis; but it fits well with two other elements: the positive reception that the movie enjoyed from the vast majority of the audience, and the general placidity of the tone of the comments. If the spectators had perceived the moral dilemma as a disturbing one, if they had been troubled by it, a greater number of them would likely have expressed disappointment of some kind, and their written responses would have been more radical, in approving or disapproving the movie. In fact, the only group that showed a negative attitude towards *The Train* is made up of those who did not accept the heroic image of the Resistance: but this is a question that will be analyzed later. The reception of a movie (as well as any other cultural product) turns out to be a much more complex issue than at first sight appears: it involves not only the cultural background of the audience, but also the setting where the product is 'consumed' and the 'intensity' of the action of consuming it.

Similar considerations can apply to the the historical validity of a movie, at first glance a less controversial aspect than its morality. A large part of the audience easily recognized the lack of truthfulness in films such as *The Train* or *The Great Escape*, the least realistic of the five<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, realism is not always a good criterion. Let us take as an example *The Longest Day*, with its all-star cast and choral scenes, which narrates the Normandy landing. It is a movie that is presented almost as a documentary and which does indeed sometimes adheres to historical truth, but at the same time it had a strong propagandistic aim. What seems to be a brutal description of the war is in fact an apology for the Allies and *their* war: in a word, it uses realism to simulate reality. The trick seems to have worked well: the spectators not only believed in its representation of the events<sup>24</sup>, but also accepted its general historical perspective, according to which the landing was the main (the only?) decisive event of the war<sup>25</sup>, and sometimes went as far as to declare that the movie was 'without

any rhetoric'<sup>26</sup>, almost exactly the opposite of what we would say today. Generally speaking, the sort of realism based on the common sense that characterizes the audience and allows it to identify major absurdities is not a good tool when it comes to unveiling ideological constructions, or evaluating events not personally experienced, such as the Normandy landing.

The spectators often drew on other criteria, however, to evaluate the movies better. Some referred to other similar movies, and *The Train*, for example, was compared to the French movie *The Battle of the Rails*, *The Longest Day* to the Italian *Il piave mormorò*<sup>27</sup>. Many cited commonplaces about human nature<sup>28</sup>; and, above all, personal experience. The latter was by far the most common but operated in a selective way since it applied neither to younger people (as the documents date from the first half of the 1960s, only those over 35, more or less, had clear enough memories of the conflict), nor to every subject: the case of a military operation like D-Day that took place in a foreign country is a good example. Incidentally, there was also a distinction between men and women since unlike female spectators former soldiers could recall their war own experiences to assess the validity of war sequences better. For example, the only one who showed some doubts about the reliability of *The Longest Day* was a 70 year old retired bank manager who had served during the Great War<sup>29</sup>.

Personal experience is, in fact, quite an ambiguous concept: people frequently consider as 'personal' experiences that they did not have, but which are part of their cultural identity since they are part of the narratives produced by their social milieu. This is often the case when a spectator generically refers to the war as an epoch of hardship, violence and tragedy: s/he does not recall a specific episode, but a generic feeling that is less a personal remembrance than a shared representation of his/her generation<sup>30</sup>. This is also the case of the memory of the Resistance, which in the questionnaires is always recalled through its general stereotypical features and never as a directly experienced phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> This lack of direct memories from the Resistance (be it a proof of non-involvement in the struggle or of a will not to remember it) can be interpreted in many different ways. It could be taken as a demonstration that, even in the heart of Northern Italy, wide social sectors remained substantially extraneous to this struggle. Secondly, it might be read as a consequence of the

mythicization of the partisan struggle, which by the time the movies were shown had produced a dominant paradigm which had been accepted by all political and cultural areas, except for the neo-Fascists. This deserves closer analysis. The memory of the Resistance had been “frozen” during the Cold War contrast between Communists and Christian-Democrats but in the second half of the 1950s emerged as a shared narrative that constituted the central pillar for the legitimacy of the Republican regime. At the same time, and precisely because of this function, major stress was put on its non-divisive and non-controversial features: the fight for national independence, the support of the whole population for the partisans’ effort, the fundamental agreement of all the members of the committee for National Liberation (CLN), the continuities with the Risorgimento and the 19<sup>th</sup> century struggles for Italian national unity.. But in the 1960s this “sterile” paradigm that could hardly foster new struggles, was being called into question by left wing groups that depicted the Resistance as class struggle and social uprising to invoke a renewal of this struggle (Cooke 2013; Craveri, Quagliariello 2006; Focardi 2005). Yet it seems that this new interpretation of the Resistance had no echo among the audience of the centre, which should not surprise us given its social composition and presumed political allegiance. Of the three wars identified by Claudio Pavone in the period from 1943 to 1945 years, –a national war, a civil war, and a class war, the audience’s memory clearly held fast to the first one (Pavone, 1991).

The particular ‘personal experiences’ outlined above can have, therefore, many different meanings and functions. Sometimes, it is no more than a rhetorical expedient to, echo widespread feeling: a 65 year old female clerk, for example, maintained that *The Great Escape* taught that ‘wars bring about the greatest sufferings and the most painful sacrifices’. Sometimes, it is used to affirm the authority of the spectator, on the basis of his/her age: ‘To our generation, the movie repeats the war we lived; which is useful, as men tend to forget; to young people, it shows how horrible the war was’ declared a 54 year old housewife referring to *The Longest Day*. Sometimes, but not often, we find a true case of ‘re-activation’ of memories through the movie: a 44 year old housewife, in summarizing *The Longest Day*, unwillingly shifted from the third to the first person, and

enthusiastically remembered ‘our incredulity, our anxieties, our hope alive at last’. Curiously, these sorts of generic memories did not always enhance comprehension of the movie. A female employee of 47 years, referring to *The Great Escape*, stated that ‘Anyone who followed with open eyes the events of that terrible war cannot find it hard to believe in the veracity of the account’<sup>32</sup>.

More specific personal memories can be found in the texts. A first example is constituted by the soldiers’ memories previously quoted. Another one – which partially overlaps with the former – is represented by the remembrances of prison camps, where no distinction was made between prison, labor, concentration, and extermination camps. This is probably connected to the general difficulty and delay with which the nature, entity, and uniqueness of the Nazi concentration system were recognized in post-war Italy and Europe (Ricoeur 2000, Traverso 2004). American war movies probably contributed to a somewhat reduced vision of the question and both *The Great Escape* and *King Rat* concentrate their attention on military prison camps, giving a watered down image of living conditions and focus much more on single cruelties than on the inhumane nature of the *lager* system<sup>33</sup>. This is not to say, though, that the lack of comprehension meant that camps are not negatively considered. Spectators seem ill at ease, sensing that this is the real dark side of the war and that it has left its legacy on post-war societies. Some viewers openly declared being ‘fed up with’ a subject that has been ‘exploited already’, showing an annoyance that comes close to revealing a guilty conscience that is surprisingly close to denial. One 25 year old graduate woman, for example, welcomed the ‘light’ and unrealistic approach of *The Great Escape* as follows: ‘Finally, a movie on concentration camps that does not willingly over-dramatize the situation’<sup>34</sup>. The majority of spectators, on the contrary, seemed to believe that any discourse about camps needed to be supported by direct testimony, implicitly recognizing the delicacy but also the controversial nature of the subject. ‘Personal experience’ can be, in this case, represented by personal memories (some former soldiers had been war prisoners, as we have seen before), by stories heard from witnesses, or simply by a generic hearsay: in any case, it is a way to refer to an ‘authority’ of some kind to validate one’s statement.<sup>35</sup>

Historical accuracy and plausibility are not the only aspects that the audience considered in judging the movies. The analysis of the spectators' comments highlights other elements, which can be roughly grouped under two main categories: those considering the war as a 'mythical territory', a context where the essential traits of human nature come to light; and those referring to the founding function that Second World War plays in the present. Neither of these, it must be noted, is a completely original product of the audience: each one, in fact, reflects a typical cliché of the 'war movie' genre.

The idea that extreme situations (war above all) unveil the true character of men is a cultural *topos* that dates back to the origins of literature itself, and has been widely exploited by cinema – this exceptional receptor and re-user of cultural products of any kind. Sometimes, this leads to interesting inquiries into the recesses of the human soul; other times, quite often in war movies, to the creation and repetition of stereotypes about cruelty, goodness, and so on. In any case, the reference to widespread representations of a collective imaginary assures that the theme is accessible to a diverse audience<sup>36</sup>. In fact, this is easily detected in the Centre's spectators. Let us take *King Rat* as an example. The movie describes life in a Japanese prison camp, focusing on a number of typical characters: the smart and dishonest American corporal, the rigid British lieutenant, the young and naïve sergeant. The audience clearly understands this kind of discourse: from the most obvious considerations about 'the beastly substrata' that re-emerges, 'the worst' who are always able to take advantage of the circumstances, or human behavior that is 'always the same', to more complex reflections about the origins and the use of power (carried out by a university assistant)<sup>37</sup>, all the spectators focused on the confrontation between different human typologies. At the same time, few of them detected the schematic form of similar classifications<sup>38</sup>. This happens not only for the main characters of *King Rat*, which are more problematic than the average but also for the minor figures of *The Great Escape* or *The Longest Day*, which is proof, if ever it was needed, of the cinema's ability to speak a language that is familiar to a great variety of people.<sup>39</sup> Not by chance some spectators compared war movies to westerns (especially *The Train* and *The Great Escape*): both genres

frequently harken back to the ‘extreme situation’ *topos* and provide new versions of it.<sup>40</sup> It is hard to determine how these clichés shape the collective imagination and why they are so easily accepted since they are already part of that imagination itself. In both cases, the result is the creation (or the confirmation) of a static set of elementary characters that appear to lie beneath a subtle layer of ‘civilization’ and to be brought to light by the extreme experience of the war<sup>41</sup>. War itself tends to become an archetype, a standard context in which to situate a set of standard human types, with the paradoxical consequence of being de-historicized. Second World War is particularly subject to this phenomenon because of the ease with which it can be represented as a conflict between good and evil: it is a much more appropriated setting for this sort of simplified anthropology than other conflicts such as the First World War or the Vietnam War. The representation of Second World War tends to turn from history to myth, from an account of specific historical facts into a narrative about the fundamental features of the human condition and collective life. Many spectators tended to consider the movies from such a perspective. A 21 year old female teacher is reminded of Ulysses’ famous speech to his mariners in Dante’s *Comedy* by the ‘spirit of rebellion and jailbreak’ of the characters of *The Great Escape*. A twenty-four year old male student offered an ‘emblematic explanation’ for *King Rat*, underlining that the characters of the film are free to create their own rules and laws. A sixty-five year old female college graduate wrote that in *The Train* ‘all man’s primordial impulses are unleashed during extraordinary historical events: war, revolutions, etc...’<sup>42</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, the most common mythological theme was the celebration of Second World War as the founding event of the contemporary world, which is to say the second category identified above. *The Longest Day* is the best example of this. Not only did the audience enthusiastically accept the rhetoric of the movie, declaring that the Normandy landing represented ‘the year zero, the beginning of a new era’, ‘our resurrection from the darkness of the Nazi war’, ‘the turning point of the biggest war in human history’; it also added to the bombastic tones of the movie a personal, more mournful, sensibility, full of sorrow and admiration for the sacrifice of young lives and the heroism of Allied soldiers<sup>43</sup>. The theme, which presents many variations, not excluding slightly erotic ones,



marks a shift from myth to epic: history does not fade into an atemporal narration since the very setting of the movie would make this difficult, but it becomes the account of the origins of the present.

<sup>44</sup> The hero is the typical character of this sort of narrative, and for a number of spectators the GIs seemed to have played that part: the comments by the audience are full of moving references to ‘the spontaneous heroism of the landing corps’ members’, to their ‘courage’ and ‘spirit of self-sacrifice’, to ‘all those young men who came from far away full of enthusiasm’<sup>45</sup>.

Such a mythical or epic context is particularly suited to an interesting operation brought about by some spectators: the recycling of old rhetorical devices, their overlapping with the main themes of the movies, and the reinterpretation on their basis of American narratives. A positive consideration of war and old-style patriotism were the elements that recurred most. As for the latter, those who recalled it usually lamented that it was a neglected value, implicitly recalling previous epochs when it had been the basis of individual and collective identities: a forty-seven year old woman believed that *The Longest Day* could help younger people to ‘understand what ‘love of Country’, a feeling now no longer present, consists of’; a housewife of forty-two, in commenting on *The Train*, stated: ‘the old railway worker is the only one who has an old-style ideal (‘Homeland’), while young partisans fight and die almost inadvertently’<sup>46</sup>. As for the former, a sort of romantic vision of war could be detected in the stress that some spectators placed on the camaraderie among fighters (*The Great Escape* was appreciated for ‘the great humanity and the esprit de corps’) or on the sense of ‘infinite compassion towards those fallen and hurt for the Country’: a heritage of the nationalist rhetoric that dates back to the XIX Century and was strongly sponsored by fascism, and that indirectly contrasts to the ‘defensive’ acceptance of patriotism recalled above.<sup>47</sup> The same recurring references to the heroism of Allied soldiers echoes a nationalist and bellicose rhetoric, which has left numerous traces in the language and the style of the Italian people, especially those raised and schooled before the fall of fascism. In fact, it may be more a matter of style than of content. Literary formulae and stylistic features which clearly derive from nationalist and even fascist language were sometimes used to express an enthusiastic approval for the contents of American narratives: a fifty-nine year old clerk

defined *The Longest Day* as ‘a manly [maschio] movie’, which exalts those who ‘sacrificed in the undertaking’ and forces us to reflect on ‘the responsibilities of being a man’<sup>48</sup>.

In these cases, old themes and languages strengthen new narratives by adapting them to an Italian sensibility. In others, instead, they are used to confront and reject American representations of the conflict. While the overwhelming majority of the audience tended to accept these American representations of the conflict, a small but meaningful minority resisted and sometimes rejected them. The reasons for this attitude can be different, and differently interpreted. As noted above, one viewer felt uncomfortable with the topic of concentration camps and the ‘harshness of the reality’ of the war; another appreciated that *The Great Escape* shows that ‘even a Nazi official can be a human creature’ – an attitude that can have many different roots, but in all cases calls into question one of the most important justifications for Second World War. A forty-five year old college graduate and housewife showed less ambiguous hostility towards the Resistance and dared to say ‘what [she] had frequently thought, but never expressed’: [that] German rules on reprisal were always made public, which implies that partisans were aware of the terrible consequences of their actions. In this case, the vision of *The Train* brings to light one of the most common anti-Resistance themes: the partisans’ responsibility for provoking Nazi massacres. Other spectators did not welcome stereotypical portrayals of Germans (“I find it useless to stress the fact that Germans were evil and all the others were good”), or were annoyed by what they considered a persistent re-opening of old wounds (‘Enough with these sad memories! Peace to the dead and glory to heroes! But peace for us too...!’, declared a fifty-four year old manager). Finally, a few spectators openly disagreed with core features of the movies’ ideology. One questioned the ‘righteousness’ of the anti-fascist alliance because of Russian participation (‘Are not the Russians guilty at all? Not even for the Katyn massacre?’; ‘Do not forget that the alliance included the Russians, who surely were not freedom-bearers’), a consideration that probably connects fascist war propaganda to post-war anti-communist attitudes. A twenty-five year old male engineer stated that *The Longest Day* was unfaithful to the book that inspired it: ‘The book [...] aims to describe “objectively”, which means without partisanship, the

course of the great battle and to pay tribute to all the Fallen'; and he [the author] even defined the Allies as 'invaders'<sup>49</sup>. The open rejections of the vision proposed by the movies were not numerous, but for the repertory of alternative narratives from which they drew their inspiration is significant, ranging from a sometimes nostalgic, sometimes reactionary remembrance of the past, which is to say from a 'right wing' position. . A progressive criticism never shows up, and this can be taken as a proof that the 'Iron Curtain' that divided Italian politics was deeply rooted in the Italian society: left-wing criticisms of American narratives were automatically suspected of communism, and thus suspicious to anti-communists. At the same time, no are there any signs of Catholic opposition, be it progressive or conservative, which is probably because war movies did not convey what the Catholic Church considered 'improper' values, such as sexual liberation or materialist consumerism. Be that as it may, the only cultural alternative to American narratives seems to have been, among the public of the Centre, a right-wing, nostalgic and residual criticism: the sort of opposition that is inevitably doomed to defeat. This left a huge space for American representations of the conflict which almost without effort became hegemonic.

In conclusion, this analysis suggests that the social sectors represented by the audience of the Centre in large part shared the values conveyed by the movies: that is, the classical 'American' values of freedom, individualism, justice, human rights, and the heroism of the common people. Obviously, the adoption of American narratives worked in a selective way. The audience was quite critical, able to judge a movie from many angles and to detect major absurdities. If it accepted many elements of the American representation of the war, it was because those elements tended to confirm the spectators own positions or, at least, were not directly opposed to them<sup>50</sup>. Proof of this can be seen in the fact that even if the audience was rarely afraid of questioning the historical reliability of the movies, it shows no negative prejudices towards them. The veracity of the films' plots were called into question, but only for reasons of plausibility, not for lack of trust. Generally speaking, the audience shows a sort of 'positive prejudice' towards American cultural products, which make them reliable until proven otherwise. This constitutes a proof of a cultural, or ideological, affinity, since

a communist audience would have been far more suspicious towards what was being shown on the screen. Further proof, or more precisely counterproof, of this can be found in the process of ‘translation’ and ‘interpretation’ of key themes in to Italian national terms of reference in the case of patriotism and memories of the Resistance.

Something similar happened with regard a key aspect of narratives about Second World War: the image of Germans and Nazis. Of the five movies shown at the Centre, only *Judgment in Nuremberg*, by far the most serious and most historically accurate of these films, confronted the complex issue of the guilt of the German people in the rise and permanence of Hitler’s power. All the others drew distinctions between the evil Nazi and the ‘normal’ German, the latter torn between patriotism and repulsion for the inhumanity of the regime which is most often represented through the opposition between the Wehrmacht and the SS. The Centre’s audience readily accepted the second representation, but seemed quite annoyed by the first<sup>51</sup>. So the anti-Germanism which has been identified by recent historians as a key theme of Italian post-war propaganda (Focardi 2013) cannot be detected here. There might be many explanations for this. As time passed it may be that the hatred and rage of the immediate post-war years faded, giving way to more reflective and analytical approaches that made it easier to distinguish between Germans and Nazis. But what we said above about the Resistance is probably valid for the image of the German people: in an audience that does not seem to have played an active role in the war of Liberation, anti-German stereotypes were not deeply rooted, and this made more detached and articulate judgments possible. In addition, the distinction between guilty Nazis and innocent Germans was useful to both American propaganda and the Italian audience: for the former, it was a way to re-integrate Germany into the family of western civilized nations, and above all into the North Atlantic Alliance; for the latter, it represented a way to separate indirectly the Italian people from Fascism, and thus, in certain cases, to absolve the nation and its citizens from past support of the regime<sup>52</sup>. In this case, too, the narratives of the movies were generally well accepted because they reinforced the audience’s self-representations and, in general, because they conveyed an acceptable image of the conflict. When this was not the case, when the

referred for example to the memories of concentration camps, they were less well accepted and even partially rejected.

However, the general reception of the movies indicates that the American films had a stronger influence when they did not directly confront the audience's own positions. In *The Longest Day* the mythical image was easily adopted by the audience because it was not directly opposed to Italian representations. Spatial distance also played its role: events which took place in faraway places were less known to Italian audiences, not only because of the lack of direct experience, but also because the Italian public narrative of the conflict mainly focused on the occupation, the Resistance, and the Liberation (Cooke 2013; Focardi 2005). The core themes of the American narratives that were most readily adopted by the Italian audience can be summed up as the tragedy of the war and the mythical function of the war. This is only an apparent contradiction, which is overcome as soon as we consider one of the main propagandistic definitions of Second World War as the war to end all wars and the war that was fought to make Good triumph definitively over Evil. In this perspective, Second World War as narrated by American movies and read by the Italian audience became a great itinerary of redemption, a sort of ancient ordeal: the more tragic it was, the purer and freer the new world born from it would be, a world of unprecedented liberty and prosperity which in the new 'Golden Age, seemed to be within everybody's grasp and constituted the core element of the Italian image of America. While all this indicates powerful support for American influence on post-war Italy, these responses were also an indirect and involuntary way to insert Italian values and representations of the war into a *corpus* of narratives that were common to all western European countries. They were, therefore, instrumental in bringing Italian perspectives into line with a US-centered Western European (a) hierarchy of values, and hence another step on the tortuous path to the creation of a European supranational cultural identity.

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<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of publications on this issue. Two recent and very interesting general studies are De Grazia 2005 and Ellwood 2012. On European reaction, see Pells 1997. On the Italian case, see Cassamagnaghi 2007; Dall'Osso 2007. On American propaganda, see Cull 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For a wider perspective on American war movies (not only on SECOND WORLD WAR), see Matelski and Lynch 2003.

<sup>4</sup> 'In American cinema, for example, the conventions of the combat movies had taken shape in 1943 in films such as *Bataan*, *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Sahara* and *Air Force*' (Chapman 2008, p. 63; Chapman is quoting Basinger 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The ground-breaking study in this field was the collective research directed by Pierre Nora (Nora 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Again, the bibliography on these issues is massive, so that I can only note some very important texts. On the memory of the Holocaust, see Bensoussan 1998; Cattaruzza 2005; Traverso 2004; Wieviorka 1998. On the Italian case, see Flores 2010. On the increasingly problematic memory of the Resistance in Italy, see Chiarini 2005; Focardi 2005. On the French case, probably the most similar to the Italian one, see Laborie 2011 and Rouso 1987. On the different memories of people's conditions during the conflict in Italy, see Paggi 2009.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'collective memory' was coined by Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1950); for a contemporary inquiry on it, see Assmann 1999, Assmann and Shortt 2012, Winter, Tilmans and Van Vree 2010.

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting and useful classification of different kinds of memories, and in particular for a distinction between memories 'embodied' in human beings and memories 'embodied' in social constructs, see Assmann 2010.

<sup>9</sup> In the first two years of staging, *The Guns of Navarone* sold more than 6 million tickets, *The Great Escape* and *The Longest Day* sold more than 4 million [data extracted from 'Lo spettacolo. Rassegna economica e sociale degli spettacoli e delle attività artistiche e culturali', published by the SIAE (Società Italiana Autori e Editori) from 1951 to 2002].

<sup>10</sup> Studies on these issues have so far focused on selling data (Spinazzola 1974) or on critics and on famous people's testimonies (Brunetta 1989); see also Ben Ghat 2001.

<sup>11</sup> 'Film discussi insieme', Centro culturale San Fedele, 1960-. The magazine is still published.

<sup>12</sup> Another interesting source is represented by the *Cineclub*, a left-wing network of *cineforum*, where movies were watched and discussed as at the Centro San Fedele; but, probably due to its communist allegiance or to a more accentuated intellectual attitude, American war movies were never considered in such a context.

<sup>13</sup> These data have been obtained through the elaboration of the information given by the members of the audience itself, who were asked to declare their professional status and occupation. For a more detailed professional (and social) profile of the Centre's public, see the following pages.

<sup>14</sup> The monograph is made up of the first two issues of the *Film discussi insieme* review.

<sup>15</sup> All the data about *Judgment in Nuremberg* can be found in Bruno, 1962, pp. 63-65; those about *The Great Escape* are drawn from *Film discussi insieme*, 1964, pp. 99-104; those about *The Longest Day* and *The Train* from 1965 issue of the review, pp. 91-124; and those about *King Rat* from the 1966 issue, pp. 137-172. All the quotations from spectators' reviews are excerpted from the same pages.

<sup>16</sup> The uncertainty about the exact number of college graduates is due to the impossibility to establish the education level of many self-defined 'housewives'.

<sup>17</sup> *The Train* (46 spectators), was seen by 15 managers and 15 white-collar professionals; *The Longest Day* (35 spectators) by 10 managers and 11 professionals; *King Rat* (22 spectators) by 8 managers and 4 professionals; *Judgment in Nuremberg* (16 spectators) by 5 managers and 3 professionals.

<sup>18</sup> They were between 12 and 18 for *The Great Escape*; 8-11 for *The Train*; 9-12 for *The Longest Day*; 6-7 for *King Rat*; 3 for *Judgment in Nuremberg*. Again, the use of range instead of a precise number is due to the fact that many women defined themselves as 'university graduates', apparently to underline their level of culture, but did not specify their current occupation, which let us suppose they were, in fact, housewives.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, I believe that the choice of many women to underline their high level of education (when the information requested was the working position) must be interpreted as a way not to identify themselves as 'dependent' wives but

as learned individuals. Obviously, it is impossible to verify such a hypothesis, but it is in line with the other characteristics of the audience.

<sup>20</sup> All the previous quotations can be found in *Film discussi...*, 1965; the first one is at p.121, the second one at p. 118, the third one at p. 123, the fourth one at p. 119, and the last one at p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> For a 66 year old housewife, the problem was 'greater than her ability to solve it'. Accordingly to this consideration, she initially declared the sacrifice acceptable in some cases (e.g. if the artworks are masterpieces, 'secular testimonies of a civilization'); but soon after, she affirmed with Christian inspiration 'the importance of every single human life; a world in its own, a unique thought in the mind of God'. *Ibid.*, p. 116

<sup>22</sup> A 43 year old woman, who refused to sacrifice life for art, declared: 'The issue would have been very different if the train had been carrying munitions.' *Ibid.*, p. 119. All quotations are from *Film discussi...*, 1965; the first one is from p. 118, the second one from p. 117, the last one from p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> 13 out of 46 spectators affirmed in various ways the unrealistic nature of *The Train*; the percentage rose to 23 out of 56 for *The Great Escape*.

<sup>24</sup> A male university student of 23 appreciated that men were 'not presented as ideal heroes, but as they really act in such circumstances'; a 48 year old female translator was especially touched by 'the veracity of the reconstruction'; a female graduate of 30 considered the movie 'a document of our recent, sorrowful history'. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

<sup>25</sup> A 66 year old housewife defined it 'the key episode of the last war'; a 51 year old female professor preferred the expression 'fateful day'. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96, a 26 year old female graduate.

<sup>27</sup> Both comparisons can be found in *Film discussi...*, 1965, the former at p. 117 and 123, the latter at p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> 'Human behaviour is always the same' stated a 45 year old male sales manager ('Film discussi...', 1966, p. 169); 'human nature is substantially the same', echoed a 55 year old male engineer (*Ibid.*, p. 165). Both used this argument to affirm the realism of the characters of *King Rat*, set in a military Japanese concentration camp).

<sup>29</sup> 'Film discussi...', 1965, p. 100. In other cases, memories are used to confirm the contents of the movies: a 50 year old manager declared that, 'having fought the war, [he]relived moments of similar dramatic intensity' while watching *The Longest Day* (*Ibid.*, p. 96); and another manager of 48, who lived for six years in a prison camp (but did not specify of what nationality), seeing *The Great Escape* remembered 'that unforgettable and unforgotten world' ('Film discussi...', 1964, p. 102).

<sup>30</sup> A housewife of 50 affirmed that to 'see war things again is always unpleasant'; a 54 year old engineer spoke of 'the absurdity of that enormous, tragic madness' ['Film discussi...', 1965, pp. 95-6).

<sup>31</sup> This is not only the case for younger people, like the 28 year old male graduate student who explained: 'partisan fighting was born from a strong moral need for opposition and always lived on [...] noble and high ideals' (*Ibid.* p. 116); also a 45 year old lawyer, who charged the director of *The Train* with never 'having known a Partisan', and ended up with speaking of 'the interior tension' that only creates heroes – and is not clearly put in evidence in the movie (*Ibid.* p. 122).

<sup>32</sup> The first, second and fourth quotations are from *Film discussi...*, 1964, pp. 102, 100, and 102; the third one is from *Film discussi...* 1965, p. 98. Other examples of the use of personal experience to affirm the authors' authority can be found in *Film discussi...*, 1964, pp. 102 (a 47 year old female clerk and 53 year old male engineer) and in *Film discussi...*, 1965, pp. 95-96 (a 54 year old male engineer and 50 year old male manager).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. See also the case of the former soldiers quoted above.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, this was not an exception at all. Until the late seventies, the representation of the Holocaust and specifically of the camps in American movies was rare and usually softened, reflecting the general difficulties that the American society (as well as that of Europe) had in dealing with the specificity of the event. On this issue, see Novick 1999. On the representation of Nazi camps in Hollywood movies, see Doneson 1987, Picart 2004, Gaetani 2006, Minuz 2010.

<sup>34</sup> The first and the second quotations are from *Film discussi...*, 1966, p. 166 and p. 169; the third one is from *Film discussi...*, 1964, p. 103.

<sup>35</sup> A 73 year old male retired journalist evoked his interviews with former prisoners in order to affirm his knowledge of the issue. See *Film discussi...*, 1966, p. 164

<sup>36</sup> A 47 year old male 'industrialist' openly recognized it: 'I think that war has been taken as a fitting [...] expressive instrument by a number of directors. In fact, it is much easier to bare some aspects of being human'. *Ivi.*

<sup>37</sup> See *Film discussi...*, 1966, p. 168. All the previous quotations are from the same issue, respectively from p. 165, p. 167, and p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> The only spectator who underlined this aspect is a 64 year old accountant, who criticized the 'exaggeratedly stereotypical' characters of the movie. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> Even the characters of *The Great Escape*, a film which is often criticized for its lack of plausibility, do not appear to be considered unrealistic; on the contrary, they are sometimes appreciated for their 'expressive power' ('Film discussi...', 1964, p. 101, a 21 year old female teacher) or for the 'balance and moderation' with which they are sketched out (*Ibid.*, p. 101, a 56 year old housewife).

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<sup>40</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 104, a 28 year old female university assistant and a 29 year old female graduate; 'Film discussi...', 1965, p. 117, a 42 year old housewife.

<sup>41</sup> This aspect is sometimes openly identified by the audience. A 60 year old female teacher started her review of *King Rat* with a list of the characters of the film: 'Gray: fanatic; King: selfish, jackal; Peter, spiritual; Hockins: sick...'. ['Film discussi...', 1966, p. 167]

<sup>42</sup> The first quotation is in *Film discussi...* 1964, p. 101; the second one in *Film discussi...* 1966, p. 166; the third one in *Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> A 40 year old housewife declared: 'The suffering and the death which so many men faced for everybody's peace and liberty moved me and made me deeply sad'. *Ibid.* p. 96. The previous quotations are all taken from *Film discussi...*, 1965, respectively from p. 97, 98, and 96.

<sup>44</sup> A 47 year old woman spoke of 'this handsome, dauntless youth, pushed to acts of bravery [...] which are immolation and enthusiastic self-sacrifice'. *Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> All quotations from *Film discussi...*, 1965, pp. 59, 97, and 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96 and p. 117.

<sup>47</sup> *Film discussi...*, 1964, p. 100 and p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> 'Film discussi...', 1965, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> The first quotation is from *Film discussi...*, 1964, p. 101; the second and the third ones are from *Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 117 and p. 123; the fourth and the fifth ones are from *Film discussi...*, 1964, p. 104; the sixth and the seventh ones are from *Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 100 and p. 99.

<sup>50</sup> In only one case was an explicit admiration for the USA (and Britain), which could be another reason to accept American representations, declared. A 47 year old female teacher stated: 'from Shakespeare to the Normandy landing, Anglo-Saxon spirit springs eternal' [*Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 100].

<sup>51</sup> A 56 year old male journalist appreciated that *The Great Escape* made a distinction between Gestapo and Luftwaffe: 'it was much easier to consider all Germans as butchers' [*Film discussi...*, 1964, p. 102]. At the same time, a 55 year old male industrialist complained that the German indicted, in *Judgment in Nuremberg*, were represented like 'idiots', because this put their case *a priori* into 'a position of inferiority' [Bruno 1962, p. 65]. Similarly, an 18 year old male student declared: 'German people are as guilty as Italian people, or Russian, British, and American' [*Ivi*]

<sup>52</sup> This attitude can be detected in what a 51 year old female teacher said: 'Even the one who at those times was on the other side [i.e.: the Fascist side] in good faith' cannot avoid a sense of 'infinite gratitude for those who sacrificed to break off Hitler's foolish and inhuman tyranny' [*Film discussi...*, 1965, p. 99]